DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 406 619 CG 027 579

AUTHOR Powell, Jack L.; Oliver, Peter V.
TITLE Adult Children of Alcoholics in the Classroom: Implications for Educators.
PUB DATE Oct 95
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Alcoholism; *Educational Experience; *Family Influence; High Risk Students; Higher Education; Hypothesis Testing; *Interpersonal Competence; Interpersonal Relationship; *Social Adjustment; Social Development; Teacher Student Relationship; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS *Adult Children of Alcoholics

ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of being an adult child of an alcoholic family (COA) on one's personal and interpersonal adjustment. First, it was predicted that because of difficulties with interpersonal trust, COAs would express less of a need for social approval compared with non-COAs. A related prediction was that COAs would report being involved in romantic relationships of shorter duration compared with non-COAs. Third, COAs were predicted to report less satisfaction with their experiences in college. The results of the respondents (58 females and 43 males) confirmed all three predictions in the investigation. Implications of these findings suggest that undergraduate COAs have a unique set of issues that may negatively affect their experiences in college. The role that teachers can play in helping COA students to develop trust and healthy relationships is examined. Contains 26 references. (Author/LSR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 406 619

Adult Children of Alcoholics in the Classroom:

Implications for Educators

Peter V. Oliver and Jack L. Powell

University of Hartford

Running Head: ADULT CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

P. Oliver

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

CG027579

Adult Children of Alcoholics in the Classroom:

Implications for Educators

This study examined the impact of being an adult child of an alcoholic family (COA) on one's personal and interpersonal adjustment. First, it was predicted that because of difficulties with interpersonal trust, COAs would express less of a need for social approval compared with non-COAs. A related prediction was that COAs would report being involved in romantic relationships of shorter duration compared with non-COAs. Third, COAs were predicted to report less satisfaction with their experiences in college. The results confirmed all three predictions in the investigation.

Also, the role teachers can possibly play in helping COA students to develop trust and healthy relationships is examined.

Adult Children of Alcoholics in the Classroom: Implications for Educators

Research on adult children of alcoholics (COAs) indicates that growing up in an alcoholic home poses a variety of risks on an individual's development that are not experienced by individuals from non-alcoholic families (Sher, 1991). Examples of these difficulties include a higher risk of developing substance abuse problems (Chassin, Rogosch, & Barrera, 1991; Russell, Henderson, & Blume, 1984), emotional problems (Richards, 1989), lower self-esteem (Tuchfeld, 1986), anxiety (Haack & Alim, 1991), lower academic achievement (Sher, Walitzer, Wood, & Brent, 1991), and other developmental deficiencies (Hibbard, 1987).

Not surprisingly, COAs seem to also have considerable problems with personal relationships (Woititz, 1984) including a higher rate of divorce and separation (Parker & Harford, 1988), difficulties expressing feelings to others (Cermak & Brown, 1982), and, in general, COAs report feeling more isolated (Brown & Sunshine, 1982) and less satisfied with relationships (Brabant & Martof, 1993). Moreover, there is considerable evidence to suggest that COAs experience difficulties with interpersonal trust (Black, 1983; Cermak & Brown, 1982; Hanson & Liber, 1989; Johnson & Pandina, 1991; Schwartzberg & Schwartzberg, 1990). It may be the case, then, that part of COAs problems with relationships may stem from a lack of trust in others.

Assuming that COAs have a difficulty with trust, there are several implications that follow from this which may affect an individual's subsequent interpersonal adjustment. One implication concerns an individual's need for social approval (NSA). Specifically, if an individual comes from an alcoholic environment and therefore has difficulties with interpersonal trust, it follows that he or she may have learned not to risk seeking approval from others. As such, these individuals would not be expected to exhibit a high need for social approval compared to individuals who are not COAs. If true, this finding would be consistent with those who argue that although COAs have their interpersonal difficulties, they have also developed a certain resiliency to deal with the potentially negative effects of growing up in alcoholic families (e.g., Berkowitz & Perkins, 1988; Werner, 1986). Furthermore, if COAs exhibit less of a need for social approval, this would contradict a commonly held

belief among many clinicians, who argue that a major characteristic of COAs is that they have a high need for social approval (Woititz, 1984).

What special implications and predictions can one draw from this discussion concerning a college undergraduate population? Well, given that the college experience involves considerable opportunities for interpersonal contact and relationships, one could draw several predictions about the college experience of COAs. Specifically, one implication of COAs lack of trust is that they will have romantic relationships of shorter duration compared to non-COAs. This finding would be consistent with the aforementioned research which suggests that COAs have more difficulties with interpersonal relationships. A second implication and prediction is that if COAs have limited trust and less positive relationships compared with non-COAs, they should also report less overall satisfaction with their experiences in college compared to non-COAs.

This study, then, examined the impact of being an adult child of alcoholics on an individual's need for social approval (NSA). Specifically, it was predicted that COAs would have less of a need for social approval compared with their non-COAs counterparts. Furthermore, this study sought to substantiate findings obtained from earlier research to offer additional support for the COA literature. Specifically, it was hypothesized that COAs will have romantic relationships of considerably shorter duration compared with non-COAs. It is also predicted that COAs will also report less satisfaction with their college experiences compared with non-COAs.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 58 females and 43 males who were enrolled in Introductory Psychology classes at a large northeastern American university. Subjects received one hour's worth of experimental credit for participating in this study.

Procedure

Subjects were seated in front of an IBM or IBM-compatible computer and instructed how to enter answers to the questionnaires previously loaded onto the machine via a computer package called

"Micro Experimental Laboratory" (MEL) (Schneider, 1988). Each subject completed a demographics questionnaire which, using a Likert-type format, assessed their attitudes and feelings about college and their experiences with relationships. Subjects also completed the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). This test is a 33-item measure of the need to appear socially desirable and be liked by others.

Analyses

Subjects' responses to the questionnaires were compared using analysis of variance and correlational methods.

Results

Subjects were identified as COA on the basis of whether they responded affirmatively to the question of whether their parents "may have had or may have an alcohol abuse problem." This single measure for determining COA was adapted from Berkowitz and Perkins (1988) who have provided considerable evidence supporting the validity of the single item measure of COA. Subjects responded twice to this question, once with respect to their father and once for their mother.

The first prediction in the present study was that because of difficulties with interpersonal trust, COAs would express a lower need for social approval compared to non-COAs. As the reader will note in Table 1, the results strongly supported this hypothesis, $F(1,97)=6.33$, $p=.01$. COAs reported a need for social approval that was significantly lower (M=12.86, S.D.=3.14) compared with non-COAs (M=15.04, S.D.=3.63). It is noteworthy that this result manifested itself only in subjects who reported both parents as having alcohol problems, as opposed to only one of them (i.e., mother or father).

It was also predicted that because of problems with interpersonal trust, COAs would be involved in romantic relationships of shorter duration compared to non-COAs. The results, presented in Table 2, strongly confirmed this hypothesis with a main effect for COA, $F(1, 97)=4.72$, $p=.03$. Again this result occurred only for subjects who identified both parents as having problems with alcohol abuse. COAs reported a length of romantic involvement of shorter duration (M=2.71, S.D.=2.28) compared with non-COAs (M=3.62, S.D.=2.25). It was also predicted that due to their issues of interpersonal trust, COAs would report being less satisfied than non-COAs in terms of their feelings about being in college. As can

be seen in Table 3, this hypothesis was strongly supported in the present experiment, $F(1, 97)=4.24$, $p=.04$. COAs, who rated both parents as having alcohol abuse problems, reported significantly less positive feelings about being in college ($M=2.57$, $S.D.=1.21$) compared with non-COAs ($M=2.00$, $S.D.=1.01$).

Discussion

This research assessed the impact of being an adult child of an alcoholic on an individual's need for social approval. Several hypotheses were tested. First, COAs were predicted to have less of a need for social approval compared with non-COAs. The results of this study supported this hypothesis. Second, COAs were predicted to be involved in relationships of shorter duration compared with non-COAs. This prediction was also supported in this study. Finally, it was predicted that COAs would report less satisfaction with their experiences in college compared with individuals who were not raised in alcoholic homes. The results of this investigation confirmed this hypothesis as well.

What implications can one draw from this investigation? To begin, certainly no two individuals are alike and, consistent with this view, every college student is a unique learner and person. However, the results of this investigation suggest the possibility that undergraduate COAs, as a group, have a unique set of issues that may negatively affect their experiences in college; College students who come from alcoholic homes may experience difficulties that are not shared by their non-COA peers. Furthermore, it has been argued that because of their apparent concerns with interpersonal trust, COAs are apparently unwilling to risk seeking approval. This finding and its interpretation are consistent with the aforementioned research on the difficulties COAs experience with interpersonal relationships. However, what is it about growing up in an alcoholic environment, that leads one to have difficulties with interpersonal trust and seeking social approval? One possible explanation may be that concerns with trust and approval-seeking may stem from a fear of rejection that may be rooted in years of negative experiences (such as rejection) with alcoholic parents (Wood, 1987). There is another explanation to account for the difficulties COAs experience with interpersonal relationships and trust. It is possible that, because of the unstable and unpredictable home environments that COAs often experience growing up (Sher, 1991), they have learned poor (or at least limited) interpersonal

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

relationship skills. As a result, they may simply not possess the "tools" to initiate, develop, and maintain positive and healthy relationships with others. However, this research is not about determining the origins of interpersonal distrust and relationship difficulties. Furthermore, it is more likely that some combination of these explanations (i.e., fear of rejection and poor relationship skill development) may account for COAs not seeking social approval. Regardless of the specific sources of their relationship difficulties, being a COA poses a unique set of challenges, not only for themselves, but also for other individuals who are a part of their lives. Further research is necessary to disseminate the exact nature and etiology of this apparent reluctance of the COA to seek social approval. Also, possible differential effects of a mother's alcoholism and/or father's alcoholism on the personality development of their children, warrant further consideration as well.

What relevance does this research have for educators? It suggests, in part anyway, the possibility that COAs are a particular "at-risk" group of individuals in that they probably seek (and unfortunately find) experiences that match their expectations that people and relationships are not to be trusted. Further, if part of COAs' difficulties are related to poorly developed interpersonal relationship skills, they may be at a disadvantage to begin with in developing relationships. If so, what COA individuals need to experience are interpersonal relationships that are trustworthy and have positive outcomes. Teachers, by virtue of their identity and role, are in an ideal position to facilitate such positive experiences and relationships with their students. It should be made clear that it is not being suggested here that teachers act as students' therapist or counselor. That is why there are professionals in that capacity. However, it is also true that an individual need not be a counselor in order for he or she to be therapeutically effective with others. Teachers, by their actions both in and out of the classroom, serve as role-models for students. This may be especially important and relevant for a student who, because of a family history of alcoholism, has not experienced many positive experiences and relationships with adults. A teacher may be one of the most significant and important relationships or role-models that they experience on a regular basis.

So what can teachers do to help their students develop trust and positive relationships? Certainly the precise role of the teacher depends on many factors, including the age and developmental

level of the student. Although much has already been written about helping younger students to develop their self-esteem (Siccone & Canfield, 1993) and self-concepts (Canfield & Clive-Wells, 1994), future research should be devoted to what teachers can do specifically to help students, of all ages, cope with alcoholic families. While it is not possible to undo the past of growing up in an alcoholic family, it may possible, nonetheless, to resolve some of the difficulties COAs experience with their interpersonal relationships. Teachers are in an ideal position to make such a positive difference in students' lives.

References

Berkowitz, A., & Perkins, H. W. (1988). Personality characteristics of children of alcoholics. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 56(2), 206-209.

Black, C. (1983). COA's: the clinical profile. Focus on Family, Nov/Dec, 32.

Brabant, S., & Martof, M. (1993). Childhood experiences and complicated grief: A study of adult children of alcoholics. International Journal of the Addictions, 28(11), 1111-1125.

Bradley, L. G., & Schneider, H. G., (1990). Interpersonal trust, self-disclosure, and control in adult children of alcoholics. Psychological Reports, 67, 731-737.

Brown, K. A., & Sunshine, J. (1982). Group treatment of children from alcoholic families. Social Work with Groups, 5(1), 65-72.

Canfield, J., & Clive-Wells, H. C. (1994). 100 ways to enhance self-concept in the classroom. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Cermak, T. L., & Brown, S. (1982). Interactional group therapy with the adult children of alcoholics. International Journal of Group Psychotherapy, 32(3), 375-389.

Chassin, L., Rogosch, F., & Barrera, M. (1991). Substance abuse and symptomatology among adolescent children of alcoholics. Journal of Abnorman Psychology, 100(4), 449-463.

Crowne, D. P., & Marlowe, D. (1960). A new scale of social desirability independent of psychopathology. Journal of Consulting Psychology, 24, 349-354.

Haack, M. R., & Alim, T. N. (1991). Anxiety and the adult child of an alcoholic: A co-morbid problem. Family and Community Health, 13(4), 49-60.

Hanson, G., & Liber, G. (1989). A model for the treatment of adolescent children of alcoholics. Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly, 6(2), 53-69.

Hibbard, S. (1987). The diagnosis and treatment of adult children of alcoholics as a specialized therapeutic population. Psychotherapy, 24(4), 779-785.

Johnson V., & Pandina, R. J. (1991). Familial and personal drinking histories and measures of competence in youth. Addictive Behaviors, 16(6), 453-465.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

McKelvie, S. J. (1989). The Wonderlic Personnel Test: Reliability and validity in an academic setting. Psychological Reports, 65, 161-162.

Parker, D. A., & Harford, T. C. (1988). Alcohol-related problems, marital disruption and depressive symptoms among adult children of alcohol abusers in the United States. Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 49(4), 306-313.

Richards, T. M. (1989). Recovery for adult children of alcoholics: Education, support, psychotherapy. Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly, 6(1), 87-110.

Russell, M., Henderson, C., & Blume, S. (1984). Children of alcoholics: A review of the literature. New York, NY: Children of Alcoholics Foundation.

Schneider, W. (1988). Micro Experimental Laboratory: An integrated system for IBM compatibles. Behavior Research Methods, Instruments, & Computers, 20, 206-217.

Sher, K. J. (1991). Children of alcoholics: A critical appraisal of theory and research. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Sher, K. J., Walitzer, K. S., Wood, P. K., & Brent, E. E. (1991). Characteristics of children of alcoholics: Putative risk factors, substance use and abuse, and psychopathology. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 100(4), 427-448.

Schwartzberg, A. Z., & Schwartzberg, K. W. (1990). Short-term group psychotherapy with adult children of alcoholics. Psychiatric Annals, 20(7), 391-394.

Siccone, F., & Canfield, J. (1993). 101 ways to develop student self-esteem and responsibility, Volume II. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Tuchfeld, B. S. (1986). Adult children of alcoholics. Hospital and Community Psychiatry, 37(3), 235-236.

Werner, E. (1986). Resilient offspring of alcoholics: A longitudinal study from birth to age 18. Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 47, 34-40.

Woititz, J. G. (1984). Adult children of alcoholics. Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly, 1(1), 71-99.

Wood, B. L. (1987). Children of alcoholism: The struggle for self and intimacy in adult life. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Table 1

Mean Self-Ratings of Dependent Measures by COA Status

	No-COA (N=81)	Yes-COA (N=21)	
Need for Social Approval (1=low; 33=high)	15.04 (SD=3.63)	12.86 (SD=3.14)	p=.01
Length of Current Relationship (1=Not Involved; 7=Three years)	3.62 (SD=2.25)	2.71 (SD=2.28)	p=.03
Feelings About Being in College (1=Feel Great; 5=Very Unhappy)	2.00 (SD=1.01)	2.57 (SD=1.21)	p=.04